

FOREWORD

In the years since 1980, the political spectrum of the United States has shifted radically to the far right. What was once the center has been pushed to the left, and what was the far right is now the center. What was considered the eccentric right-wing of American politics is now considered the normal conservative outlook. What was the left is now at the far edge, barely holding its precarious position and treated in the news as a sometimes amusing oddity. Republican conservatives dismiss in ridicule more moderate Republicans as heretical “Eastern moderates” or “Rockefeller Republicans” (after the former Republican vice president under President Gerald Ford in 1974).

Within the Democratic Party, conservatives in the Congressional Leadership Council have for decades pushed their party more toward what they call “the center.” This included President William Clinton (1993–2001), sponsored liberal programs but as the former leader of the Democratic Leadership Council was committed to centrist initiatives and had to contend with a running battle against impeachment launched by a Republican House of Representatives. The result has been that over the years, the Republican and Democratic parties have continued to overlap so much that, as Democrats have moved toward the right, conservatives have moved to the far right.

This shift has had sweeping consequences. It has muffled social justice as a governing principle in government agencies. It has granted advantages to the wealthy and to large corporations at the expense of the middle and working class. It has reversed earlier reforms by starving agencies like the Securities and Exchange Commission and tried to privatize

Social Security, enacted under President Franklin Roosevelt, a Democrat, in the 1930s. It has cut back conservation and environmental laws first enacted by President Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican, at the turn of the twentieth century. These changes have presented to American voters the narrowest range of political and ideological choices among all industrial democracies in the world. The choices are increasingly disconnected from the country's most urgent social and economic problems.

Money from corporations and the most wealthy citizens provides most campaign funds. It pays for the corporate Washington law firms and lobbyists that influence what legislation will be introduced or disappear quietly in a congressional committee and never emerge for public debate or an open vote by the House and Senate. Money is still the mother's milk of American politics. It pays for the expensive television political advertisements and mass mailings, and it is in the nature of wealth and politics that most of this money comes from conservative sources. The major mass media have played a central role in this shift to the right.

The daily printed and broadcast news on which most Americans depend has always selected as its basic sources the titled leaders of the corporate and political world. These sources are legitimate elements in the news since these leaders make decisions that have a major influence on the country and on the world. But in a democracy more is needed. There is another side to national realities. It is the news and views of organizations whose serious studies document urgent needs of the middle-class and the poor and of tax-supported basic institutions like the public schools.

Yet, only in minor, specialized exceptions do the major news media reflect this other half of the national realities. These appear in periodic colorful fragments, like an occa-

sional human interest profile, but not in systematic, daily information from serious organizations that document feasible programs to meet the needs of most ordinary Americans.

Ideas, views, and proposed programs that go beyond those of established power centers are the domain of small-circulation political journals and magazines on what, in the United States, is called “the Left.” These include books from small book publishers, progressive Internet essays, and publications like *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, and *Extra!* Their criticisms and proposals only slowly, and in fragments, move by osmosis into mainstream news. Even the names of progressive publications and think tanks do not normally appear as the original sources of the proposed ideas and programs. Progressive ideas and suggested programs slowly trickle into the major news, but anonymously and too late to affect pending actions in cities, states, and official Washington. They remain obscure in the daily printed and broadcast news and thus increase a public sense of hopelessness.

In contrast, the major printed and broadcast news frequently uses—prominently, unapologetically, and by name—conservative think tanks like The Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Hoover Institution. These conservative sources are not without useful data, but they are generated with far-right goals in mind and are regarded by the main media as more “respectable” sources. Rupert Murdoch created a serious organ of conservative thought, *The Weekly Standard*, edited by William Kristol, which was required reading in the White House of Republican president George W. Bush. The paper’s editors are frequent guests of network programs of news and commentary, while editors and writers of left organizations are rarely invited.

This imbalance has had fundamental consequences. One

example is the radical change since 1980 of wealth distribution in the United States. Holders of great wealth, with minor exceptions, have always preferred political conservatives, who are the main proponents of lower income taxes (or none at all) and who favor reduced governmental social services for the general population. The progressive income tax, for example, has shrunk so drastically that the top rate for the most wealthy is less than half its level of 1970. During this period of drastic shrinkage, national household income has been moving toward the richest families with stunning speed. By 2001, the richest 15 percent of families possessed more of the national household income than all of the remaining 85 percent of Americans.¹

The mass media are fundamental in creating this transformation. In the modern world, the major media are almost inescapable. Most of the population tell pollsters that they depend on the mass media for their news. It is a handful of large media conglomerates that create the daily and nightly news world for a majority of Americans.

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Every person in our time lives in two worlds.

One is the natural, flesh-and-blood world that has been the environment of human beings since the origins of *Homo sapiens*. Men, women, and children grow up and mature in families, schools, neighborhoods, and community life. They interact face to face with other human beings in endless complex variations. They create social patterns, laws, systems of education, codes of ethics and are influenced by instincts accumulated from immeasurable human encounters. They comprehend sights, sounds, and smells, whether in the outer reaches of Siberia or in midtown Manhattan. Instincts

formed through the millennia are so embedded in human senses that even infants react to expressions of others.

The other world in which most human beings live today is the mass media world. In terms of human history, it is new and sudden. Its origins may go back to signs and symbols in prehistoric times or to Gutenberg's movable type four hundred fifty years ago. Those earlier changes ultimately undercut the traditional monarchical and religious social orders in their own time.

Today's modern mass media transcend global differences in language, culture, social class, and even penetrate illiteracy. When measured on the scale of human experience, change has come upon us swiftly, a world contrived by human beings in our own time. At its creation, it was the work of curious and ingenious individuals. But their creations have been adopted by corporations and governments with a variety of goals — some of genuine benefit for science, education, and personal gratification; some for profit, social conditioning, self-censorship, and control. Compared to the long history of face-to-face human contact, there has been too short a period for universal perception of what in the media is benevolent and what is harmful, what is designed for the privileged and what for the common good.

Today, the rapidly evolving digital world is added to the traditional media. Modern mass media in the industrial nations have transformed social relations, politics, economic and legal structures. Most inhabitants of industrialized nations spend an extraordinary portion of their daily life within this new world. We continue to argue how individuals can find a humanistic balance between their flesh-and-blood environment and the contrived power of the new media. Nevertheless, only a handful of powerful, monopolistic corporations inundate the population day and night with news,

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images, publications, and sounds. It is a world into which every child is now born.

This book is an attempt to describe the nature, the impact, and the actors in this new world and how it seems to be evolving with such bewildering speed and mixed blessings in our own time.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

As a young reporter in Providence, R.I., I used to drop by for tea in the back room of a secondhand bookstore run by Mary and Douglas Dana. Douglas, a rosy-cheeked Scot, would pull out his latest find in first editions and Mary would predict that he would keep the book and never sell it. One Saturday afternoon, Douglas showed me a first edition that made a difference in my reportorial life. It was *The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti*, edited by Marion Denman Frankfurter and Gardner Jackson.

I knew that there had been a “Sacco and Vanzetti Case.” I had been seven years old when the two men were electrocuted at Charlestown Prison in Boston. I never heard anything except certitude that the two Italians were murderers and that when the switch was thrown on their electric chair there was such a powerful flow of electricity that in my hometown of Stoneham, fifteen miles away, and in all of eastern Massachusetts, the electric lights blinked. I had no childhood reason to doubt their guilt and I remember no seven-year-old’s reservations about the death penalty. But I was awed by the phenomenon of thousands of homes where a flicker of darkness recorded the deaths of two criminals.

That was all I knew about Sacco and Vanzetti when I first saw Douglas Dana’s book, with its good, clear type and solid binding. As I flipped through the pages my eye caught the recurring name of Alice Stone Blackwell. A feminist editor and writer, daughter of Lucy Stone, Alice Stone Blackwell, it was clear from the book, had befriended the two prisoners. I re-

membered seeing a poem my mother wrote and dedicated to her friend Alice Stone Blackwell. I was interested in Alice Stone Blackwell, so Douglas Dana reluctantly sold me the book.

Reading the letters of Sacco and Vanzetti started a reportorial pursuit that took much of my spare time for the next several years. It let me to a tantalizing brush with a definitive solution to the crime for which Sacco and Vanzetti were falsely convicted and killed. I learned that it was untrue that the lights blinked anywhere when the men were electrocuted. But from endless readings of the trial transcript, post-trial affidavits and appeals, official reports, interviews with principals still living, and the books that even now, sixty years later, are still being written about the case, I also learned something about the social role of newspapers.

Sacco, a shoe repairman, and Vanzetti, a fish peddler, were arrested for the killing of a paymaster and his assistant in South Braintree, Mass., in 1920. It was a cold-blooded murder on a sidewalk in daylight by five men who drove off in a car. Sacco and Vanzetti were Italian immigrants and anarchists. Their arrest came during a national hysteria, whipped by fear of the Russian Revolution a few years earlier, by an endemic bias against all "foreigners," by an uninformed public notion about anarchists, and by A. Mitchell Palmer, attorney general of the United States, who used the Department of Justice to attack all radicals in mass arrests known as "the Palmer Raids," which had become almost a national sport.

At the time of the arrests, most newspapers supported the Palmer Raids and, despite the overwhelming evidence of gross improprieties of justice, were enthusiastic about convicting Sacco and Vanzetti. The press is a mirror of sorts, which might account for its reflection and promotion of the

hysteria. But in its great numbers and variety, it is also supposed to be a kind of balance wheel, bringing reason and diversity of opinion to its reporting and commentary. The balance wheel had failed.

By the time Sacco and Vanzetti were to be electrocuted in 1927, most of the serious press had changed its mind. Reporters confirmed that the state had been dishonest and suppressed evidence. Editors had become convinced that there had been a grave miscarriage of justice. It was too late. By that time the pride of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts had become attached to the need to electrocute the two defendants. The state, frozen in its attitude, resisted a commutation because, in the words of Herbert Ehrmann, an admirable lawyer in the case, it would have “signaled a weakness within our social order.”

In the United States we depend on our mass media to signal, among other things, “weakness in our social order.” In 1921, when Sacco and Vanzetti were tried, the newspapers failed to send that signal, though there was ample evidence to support one. By 1927, when the men were electrocuted, a significant portion of the press had changed its mind. The change did not save the two men, but it said something about the media.

The lesson repeated itself during my subsequent work as a reporter. The news media are not monolithic. They are not frozen in a permanent set of standards. But they suffer from built-in biases that protect corporate power and consequently weaken the public’s ability to understand forces that create the American scene. These biases in favor of the status quo, like the ones operating during the Sacco-Vanzetti case, do not seem to change materially over time. When Senator Joseph McCarthy gained demagogic power, he did it, as did A. Mitchell Palmer thirty years earlier, with the enthu-

siastic support of most newspapers. The newspapers had to abandon disciplines of documentation and critical judgment in order to promote McCarthy, but they did it.

During the emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1950s, most of the best regional papers, in the North and the South, would tell me when I dropped in for the traditional “fill-in” for outside journalists, that there was no serious problem in their “colored districts.” Yet in city after city there came racial explosions that surprised even the local media.

When I was reporting on structural poverty in the early 1960s, once again in the newsrooms of some of the best papers I was told that there was no significant problem. But a few years later it was clear that not only was there a problem, but it had existed for a long time.

Yet if I asked these same papers about welfare cheaters, low-level political chicanery, or failings of almost any public agency, their libraries were full of clippings.

There was, it appeared, a double standard: sensitive to failures in public bodies, but insensitive to equally important failures in the private sector, particularly in what affects the corporate world. This institutional bias does more than merely protect the corporate system. It robs the public of a chance to understand the real world.

Our picture of reality does not burst upon us in one splendid revelation. It accumulates day by day and year by year in mostly unspectacular fragments from the world scene, produced mainly by the mass media. Our view of the real world is dynamic, cumulative, and self-correcting as long as there is a pattern of even-handedness in deciding which fragments are important. But when one important category of the fragments is filtered out, or included only vaguely, our view of the social-political world is deficient. The ultimate human intelligence—discernment of cause and effect—becomes damaged because it depends on knowledge

of events in the order and significance in which they occur. When part of the linkage between cause and effect becomes obscure, the sources of our weakness and of our strength become uncertain. Errors are repeated decade after decade because something is missing in the perceptions by which we guide our social actions.

My personal associations, professional experience, and research tell me that journalists, writers, artists, and producers are, as a body, capable of producing a picture of reality that, among other things, will signal “weakness in the social order.” But to express this varied picture they must work through mainstream institutions and these institutions must be diverse. As the most important institutions in the production of our view of the real social world—newspapers, magazines, radio, television, books, and movies—increasingly become the property of the most persistent beneficiaries of mass media biases, it seems important to me to write about it.

